

Medieval Archaeology

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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Post-Roman to Medieval landscape transformations in the Erlauf Valley, Austria (5th–11th centuries AD) a Mick Aston Grant report

Targeted geophysical survey has been employed to investigate the open rural settlement types and strategies adopted prior to the renaissance of a strong urbanism in a core zone of central Europe, the Erlauf Valley (Austria), in order to study two transformations of the 5th–11th centuries AD relevant to large parts of Europe: the end of Roman rule and Frankish colonisation. The research forms part of a broader project of the PI, investigating – by systematic fieldwalking survey and targeted geophysical survey – post-Roman to high medieval landscape transformations in various areas of the Erlauf Valley. The study region provides excellent opportunities for investigating these phenomena, as it formed part of the Roman province of Noricum until AD 488, and was variously controlled/influenced afterwards by Germanic groups and Avars, until it became part of the ‘East-Land’, an area colonised by the Carolingians in the Danube Basin in the 9th century, and colonised again by the Ottonians in the 10th–11th century. While written sources attest to

these political transformations, there has been limited information available to date on how these developments were manifested in the landscape, and specifically how they impacted upon settlement dynamics.

Geophysical surveys – magnetometry and electrical resistivity – were carried out with the support of the Mick Aston Grant from the Society for Medieval Archaeology in the region of the present-day towns of Purgstall and Wieselburg in November 2018. A total of c. 10 ha was investigated at six sites (Site 16 Zehnbach; Site 39 Hochrieß; Site 10 Purgstall; Site 115 Gries; Wieselburg, South of the Church Hill; Wieselburg Recreational Centre). The geophysical survey was carried out by Dr Steven Trick and Jake Godfrey, in cooperation with the PI. The practical survey work was additionally supported by Teodora Polyak, a PhD student of the University of Exeter and Cranfield University, writing her thesis on the archaeometry of early medieval pottery from the Erlauf Valley. The geophysical surveys were combined with fieldwalking surveys of five of the six sites

The importance of material culture underscores the relevance of Archaeology to cultural discourse, yet it is necessary to continually reaffirm this message. Of late, it is most interesting to sense the growing comfort that medieval archaeologists have with the interplay between material remains and written sources. Hopefully gone are the days when archaeologists stood at a remove from documents, just as historians failed to grasp the relevance of objects. Mark Hall's report on the recent A-S exhibition at the BM suggests this positive shift, while the Society's forthcoming conference on the Black Death will surely be a *tour de force* of such interdisciplinarity.

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Left:
Site 39 Hochrieß. Photograph by Teodora Polyak.

(Wieselburg Recreational Centre is covered by lawn, therefore fieldwalking was not possible there) with the support of a Society of Antiquaries of London Research Grant. Further fieldwalking and geophysical surveys will be carried out in 2019 in the Steinakichen area of the Erlauf Valley with the support of a match funding Research Grant from the County of Lower Austria.

The combined geophysical and fieldwalking surveys in the region of Purgstall and Wieselburg have shown that (1) all investigated 5th–11th-century sites are situated at a former Roman site; (2) after the Roman period, most of these sites (4 of 5) were only re-occupied during the Carolingian and Ottonian colonisation (9th–11th centuries); (3) only a minority of the sites (1 of 5) was inhabited in the 7th–8th centuries; (4) at present, the pottery of the 6th century AD cannot be identified in the region, and possibly results from the ongoing use of late Roman pottery after the formal end of Roman rule in AD 488; (5) only some of the investigated sites (2 of 5) have prehistoric material, which suggests a natural landscape change (e.g. water level) prior to the start of Roman occupation. In addition, the geophysical surveys suggest that it is unlikely that early medieval rural sites in the Erlauf Valley comprised mainly sunken-featured buildings, as no features of this type could be identified by the surveys. The nature of buildings at early medieval settlement sites has been a long-standing debate in central Europe, as hardly any remains of ground-level buildings have been uncovered. We expected sunken-featured buildings in the Erlauf Valley, as further in the east of Austria and Hungary such buildings are widespread at early medieval settlement sites. So far, no large-scale early medieval settlement research has taken place in the Erlauf Valley or in the areas immediately to the west of this region; therefore, comparative data from these areas is not available. Based on the survey results, plans for

any future excavation in the Erlauf Valley need to include considerations for identifying remains of early medieval ground-level buildings, which leave much less obvious traces in the archaeological record than sunken-featured buildings

The new surveys provide new data and are an important starting point for understanding landscape transformations in this very rich archaeological region. The investigations form part of the PI's broader research project on post-Roman to high medieval landscape transformations in the Erlauf Valley and will be evaluated in detail following the completion of all surveys. It will also be the time when the broader research questions of the project, such as the choice of sites for settlements relative to landscape features (e.g. terrain, hydrology, geology, soils), and the spatial extent and internal structure of sites can be addressed in more detail. An interesting aspect will be whether differences can be seen in these parameters between different parts of the Erlauf Valley and/or between different historical periods, which would show the adoption of different strategies for occupying and using the post-Roman landscape.

The project funded by the Mick Aston Research Grant has facilitated a strengthening of contacts with professional and academic archaeology in Austria as well as with local historians and the broader public. In addition to the new academic knowledge gained in the course of the project, researchers from the UK got to know Austrian colleagues, as well as local people and aspects of their lives. At the same time, inhabitants of the region met people arriving from a different country with an academic interest in the region's past. In the present-day political climate, these aspects of archaeological fieldwork should not be underestimated.

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Site 115 Gries. Photograph by Dominik Hagmann.